

# Gender Relations in Inuit Drum Dances

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This article demonstrates how the analysis of the performance of Inuit drum dancing among the Inuit of Arviat, Nunavut, reveals complex issues of gender within historical and present-day society. I first studied indigenous music with Dr. David Elliott at the University of Toronto. This research dealt with music education as cultural education and helped me understand the connections between music education as a means of providing authentic music practices and music production as a means of revealing aspects of culture and tradition within a given society. Works published by Beverley Diamond Cavanagh (1976) and Ramon Pelinski (1979) helped me understand the drum dance performed by two specific bands of Inuit: the Netsilik and the Caribou Inuit. These groups are located on the southwest side of Hudson Bay and northern Baffin Island. Subsequently, conversations with Dr. Diamond (my supervisor at Memorial University) have contributed to my greater understanding of the cultural meaning of drum dancing.

I focused my research in a rural community called Arviat. Still identified on many maps by its former name, Eskimo Point, Arviat comes from the Inuktitut name for bowhead whale, *arviq*. It is located on the southwestern part of the Hudson Bay, and Thule culture sites there date back to AD 1100. Traditionally, *Ahiarmiut* (Inland Inuit), *Arviamiut* (Sea Inuit) and *Padlirmiut* (Nomadic Inuit), lived in their camps in the areas surrounding Arviat and came together in the community at springtime to participate in the seal hunt and conduct social festivities with their neighbours. These three bands of Caribou Inuit, each with their own traditions, language, and history, were brought together in the community as a result of a Federal Government relocation program in the 1950s (Tester and Kulchyski 1994). Musical production has been influenced by the amalgamation of the three groups of Inuit as well as by non-Inuit media and live performance.

I had the extraordinary opportunity from 2001-2004 to gather material and information about Inuit

drum dancing among the Caribou Inuit of Arviat, Nunavut, thanks to my employment as music teacher at Qitiqliq High School in Arviat. While living there I founded a choir called *Arviat Imngitingit* (singers). This choir is comprised of students from Qitiqliq High School and adults from the community and it specializes in traditional and contemporary Inuit music originating from the Kivalliq region of Nunavut.

The *Arviat Imngitingit* are famous for their expertise in Traditional Inuit Throat Singing, A-ya-ya Singing and Drum Dancing and they enjoy singing contemporary Inuit folk songs and gospel songs in *Inuktitut* as well. Several members of *Arviat Imngitingit* have traveled to Greenland and Alberta to perform for the opening and closing ceremonies of the Arctic Winter Games and others have traveled to Brandon, Manitoba, to perform with the Brandon University Chorale at *Rural Forum 2002*. All thirty choristers participated in *Festival 500: Sharing the Voices*, an international choral festival in Newfoundland in 2003. The choir has been highlighted in television programs on Global Television and Aboriginal Peoples' Television Network and in newspapers such as the National Post, Evening Telegram, Southern Gazette, Kivalliq News, and News North. This long-term lived experience and research allowed me to gather recordings, interview elders, transcribe and translate songs, and perform traditional Inuit drum dances with *Arviat Imngitingit*.

### **Division of Labour**

Traditionally, Inuit men and women had their own tasks and spent most of their time in the company of others of their own gender. Many scholars have interpreted this economic pattern to emphasize the dependency of Inuit women on men (Friedl 1975). They point out that the very survival of women and their children in some seasons depended wholly upon the food that men brought home. This control over the most important resources in the society conveyed a clear advantage to men, who could have used it to control women in any variety of ways.

Other interpretations focus more broadly on the process of economic life and find the division of labour to be a complementary male-female partnership as the key for survival (Balikci 1970; Guemple 1995; Spencer 1984; Ager 1980). The time and effort hunters put into each hunt precluded them from doing other necessary chores. Without the waterproof, warm clothing made by the women, the men could not have survived a

winter hunt. Women also secured the homes and prepared food for hunters who had no energy left when they returned. Additionally, child care that was essential to the continuance of the society was firmly in the women's hands. While women could not have survived without the products of men's labour, men likewise could not have continued to concentrate on hunting without the products of women's labour.

It seemed reasonable to expect that these traditional social arrangements might also have found expression in Inuit cultural life. I therefore wanted to know whether and how such sexual divisions of labour were reflected historically in performances of traditional drum dances among the Inuit of Arviat, Nunavut. And since the Inuit traditional "hunter/gatherer" society in the areas surrounding Arviat has been strongly impacted by colonization, missionization, and relocation, it would also be interesting to discover how much these influences have impacted the shaping of gender identity and, in turn, whether changes to the traditional sexual division of labour are reflected in contemporary drum dancing.

### **Methodology: Ethnographic Research/Participant Observation**

I used ethnographic research methods to conduct this research project. Ethnography is the inspection of social situations (Goodall 2000). It attempts to describe and understand the construction of socio-cultural worlds. Ethnographic practice is attendance; it is a co-presence of ethnographer and the observed social situation and it unfolds complexity. The potential of this method lays in what Geertz (1973) calls "thick description".

Geertz' demanding of "thick description" is based on the premise that a thick description can be achieved only when the ethnographer can deeply immerse herself in the culture to be described. According to Geertz, the process of understanding happens in the field – rather than later on at the office desk when the data is being analyzed. This process of understanding refers to the hidden aspects of the examined culture; he is after "construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical" (Geertz 1973). This approach is about symbols and about culture being a "web of meaning." Participant observation, an integral aspect of ethnographic research, provides an understanding of social situations, everyday routines and embodied practices.

It is my aspiration that through "thick description" of the field, responses of my informants, and observations of audience response to musical

performance an understanding of this social situation will be achieved.

### **A Performance Approach**

Michelle Kisliuk (2000) takes a performative approach to her research to try to understand the performance style, aesthetics, and micropolitics of BaAka social life in Central Africa. Focusing on gender relations during performance of the BaAka women's dances *Dingboku* and *Elamba*, she shows how BaAka negotiate power within dynamic circumstances. She concludes that the gender tensions revealed through performance of the women's dances illuminate how the BaAka of the Bagandou region are responding to changes in the economic and political conditions of the society in which they live, making choices about their future, and determining who they wish to become.

Kisliuk's research is important to my own study of Inuit music in Arviat, Nunavut for two reasons. First, like the BaAka, the Inuit traditional "hunter gatherer" society has been influenced by colonization, missionization, and relocation into larger towns. It would be interesting to know whether these influences have had a similar impact on the shaping of gender identity. Second, as a model for my research, her performative approach to the musical discourses and practices of relocated communities or communities undergoing massive sociopolitical upheaval helped shape my methodology for this project.

### **Telephone Interviews**

I chose Gara Mamgark as one of my informants for this research project. Gara is an eighteen-year-old woman who is actively involved in the musical community: as a member of *Arviat Piliriqatigit*, she hosts a radio request show on Tuesday evening; she sings with *Arviat Imngitingit* and has traveled with the choir to Alberta to perform for the opening and closing ceremonies of the Arctic Winter Games; to Brandon, Manitoba, to perform with the Brandon University Chorale at *Rural Forum 2002*; and to St. John's, Newfoundland to participate in *Festival 500: Sharing the Voices*, an international choral festival in 2003. She plays the guitar at the Mikilauq Centre during sing-along gatherings for children, and she regularly attends the teen and square dances held on weekends.

Gara is a grade twelve student at Qitiqliq High School in Arviat, Nunavut. She is bilingual. Inuktitut is her first language, her second language is English. I first met Gara at Qitiqliq High School in 2001 where I was the music teacher and she a

student in grade eight. Her mother, Rosie Mamgark, was a teaching assistant at the same school and we immediately became friends. Gara's parents are avid hunters; they hunt every weekend and holiday. In the fall and winter the family follows the caribou herds. In the spring and summer they hunt seals and whales. I often went on hunting expeditions with the Mamgark family and feel that these lengthy excursions, where I talked and interacted with Gara and her family on a very personal level, contributed to the close and comfortable relationship I have with my informant.

I have been friends with the Mamgark family for four years. Even now, as I am living in St. John's, some 4,000 kilometers away from Arviat, we keep in touch through e-mails and telephone calls. For this reason, Gara made an excellent informant because she was comfortable speaking to me and answering my questions and I was at ease speaking with her. We have often discussed Inuit traditions and culture in the past and I found Gara to be eager to share her knowledge and opinions.

It is important to mention that for these interviews both Gara and I realized that the telephone calls were not just personal, friendly calls. I, as a researcher, have interacted with members of the community of Arviat and have established relationships with Inuit. People know my research role and my aim for data collection. Gara and I are friends but she also is aware of and is supportive of my research aims. As Shaffir, Dietz, and Stebbins state: "The chances of one's research being accepted are increased when the researcher's interests appear to coincide with those of the people being studied." (p. 7). I have laid the groundwork for achieving trust and rapport by living in and participating in the life of Arviat for three years. I have "learned the ropes" (p. 10) and have obtained an "intimate familiarity" (p.10) with this Inuit social life. Gara was more than willing to share her musical repertoire with me because trust and rapport were gained, a research/informant relationship was established, and research aims and goals were discussed at the onset.

Ronnie Illungiyok, my second informant for this project, has been singing and dancing with *Arviat Imngitingit* since the choir's creation in 2001. He is a 28-year-old man, born to a traditional family of hunters and gathers, and was raised in hunting camps outside of Arviat in the summers and in the town itself during school months. Ronnie and his family are dedicated Catholics: he attends mass every Sunday with his family, plays in the church band, organizes youth groups, and travels with Inuit youth to Catholic summer camps and gatherings. As an expert drum dancer he brings drumming technique,

expertise and Inuit traditional knowledge about music to other members of *Arviat Imngitingit*. He learned how to play the drum in the Inuit traditional manner: from his father, Silas Illungiyok. The drum that Ronnie chooses to play at rehearsal or during performance is one owned by the male members of the Illungiyok family. It was made by Ronnie's uncle, Henry Ethlungant, a well known and highly respected Elder and drum maker from Arviat.



*Ronnie Illungiyok*

### **Inuit Gendered Performance: Historical Inuit Drum Dance**

Traditional Inuit drum dancing historically played a part in almost every gathering, whether it was a celebration of a birth, a marriage, the changing of the seasons, a successful hunt, a first kill, a greeting for visitors, or to honour someone who had died. In these instances, news of a special event would be spread by word of mouth; many people would travel long distances to attend. Some dances took place with just a few participants; others might fill the huge *qaggiq*, a special snow house where people gathered to socialize (Rasmussen 1999; Rink 1997; Birket-Smith 1976).

In the traditional dance, historically, singers — usually women — sat in a circle. Sometimes a man would volunteer to be the first dancer; at other times a group of men sitting behind the singers would coax someone to start. If no one came forward, the women would start singing, usually a personal song (*pisiit*) of a man in attendance, who would then be obligated to

dance. Except for occasional tea breaks, drum dances continued unabated long into the night (Rasmussen 1999; Marsh 1987).

Every drum dancing song is a story in itself, a life experience of the male composer. Pat Netser, an *Inuk* employee with the Department of Education in Arviat, Nunavut, states in her research: “the language of drum dance songs is very poetic; the composer never says things directly, he writes his songs metaphorically” (my summary from a *Pisiit* Workshop in Baker Lake, Nunavut, 2003). The composers of drum dance songs were usually male and they wrote about their experiences on the land. Traditionally, stories and songs were the primary medium used to convey aboriginal knowledge. Stories and songs were used to record a history of the people and to pass it on from one generation to the next. In a telephone interview with Pat Netser she states, “the men sang their *pisiq* to their wives who in turn taught the songs to the other women in the camp. At social times, when this song was sung, that man who made the song was supposed to drum dance.” She continues, “this was how his story about his hunting experience was told to the rest of the camp and people remembered it.”

It could be said that the social phenomenon of sexual division of labour in historical Inuit society extends to the sexual division of performance practice in drum dancing. Historically, Inuit men and women had definite gender roles in the traditional hunter and gatherer society that were necessary for survival in a cold and harsh land, and these gender role divisions seem to be present in the performance of the drum dance. The composer, always a man, dances while his song is being sung by the women in the camp, and this is how his story is told and remembered by future generations.

### **Inuit Gendered Performance: Present Day Inuit Drum Dance**

Does this sexual division of labour exist in Arviat today? I focused on gender relations during performance of present day Inuit drum dances to illuminate how Inuit negotiate power within dynamic circumstances.

Drum dancing is still practiced in communities such as Arviat, Baker Lake, Rankin Inlet, Repulse Bay, Gjoa Haven, Kugluktuk, Cambridge Bay, Pelly Bay, Taloyoak and Igloolik. Unfortunately, drum dancing is generally no longer practiced for traditional reasons; in most places it is done for tourists. It is sometimes performed at symbolic celebrations, such as opening ceremonies for conferences and festivals, at graduations, and in movie productions.

Today in Arviat, gender roles still exist and many of them are the same as in historical times. Others, however, have changed. Shepard (1997) argues the Alaskan Inuit changed the features of their social organization in the nineteenth century when Protestant and Roman Catholic economic and social values became widely accepted. She suggests further that the roles of men and women within a household also underwent a radical transformation when belief systems changed, leading Inuit to move into Western-style houses and out of their traditional domestic systems. The arguments Shepard makes about shifts in male and female domestic roles and that male and female interactions and activities were altered in the new dwellings also apply to the Inuit of Arviat, who underwent massive relocation activities performed by the Canadian Federal Government in the 1950s (Tester and Kulchyski 1994).

While the women in historical times in the Arviat area did not drum dance, many women in the community will participate in the activity today. I examined three examples of contemporary Inuit drum dancing, *Qilaup Pisia*, *Qiugaviit*, and *Quviasulipunga*, to determine performer and audience responses to gendered roles. I wanted to know whether and how sexual division of labour might take shape in performances of traditional Inuit drum dances among the Inuit of Arviat, Nunavut, in present day contexts.

I have had the opportunity to observe Ronnie drum dance on many different occasions (usually for festivals or tourists) and for many different traditional and contemporary Inuit drum dance songs. What follows is a technical description of his dancing. First, if Ronnie is drumming for *Qilaup Pisia*, a traditional song written by an elder from Chesterfield Inlet, he plays in a “traditional manner”. The drum dancing sequence looks like this: holding his drum with the frame facing down, the handle of the drum positioned near his waist, Ronnie enters the semi-circle of kneeling women. Using the drum beater, he hits the drum three times and simultaneously shouts “Oi, Oi, Oi”. This is a call to invite the women to sing. Once the women begin singing, Ronnie begins to drum dance, slowly at first. He bends his knees and swings the drum in his left hand back and forth with a sweeping motion while his right hand, holding the drum beater, hits the drum in three specific locations on the frame of the drum (creating a triangular pattern). His head moves from side to side just as the drum is moving back and forth and once in a while he shouts “Oi” when he feels that the women should be singing louder and/or with more emotion. As the song progresses, Ronnie’s drumming becomes faster and faster. There is no particular steady beat;

the drumming does not follow the beat of the music as you normally hear in Western style, say, in pop or country music. The drumming is a separate entity from the singing, and Ronnie plays slowly or quickly depending on how he “feels” during the dance. When the song is over, Ronnie finishes with a few more beats of the drum, getting softer with each one.

Second, if Ronnie were dancing for the contemporary drum dance *Qiugaviit* from the Baffin Island region of Nunavut, his drumming style would be completely different. *Qiugaviit* is not sung by women kneeling in a semi-circle as is customary for traditional Inuit drum dances. Instead the women are standing in a line one behind the other and they “march” in time to the beat of the song. Ronnie, located at the back of the line, holds the drum above his head and beats it in time to the music and the marching. As the song progresses, the women, still marching, form a small circle around Ronnie. When the song is finished, Ronnie ends with his drum dramatically held in the air for several seconds before he releases the tension in his arms and lowers the drum.

The audiences at the Mark Kalluak Hall or Qitqliq High School all love these two drum dances. They clap appreciatively at the conclusion of the performances and many people have commented on the excellent drum dancing. Ronnie is known throughout the community to be an expert drum dancer, just like his father, Silas Illungiyok.

As stated before, drum dancing traditionally, and for the most part even today, is an activity reserved for men. Women sing the song that accompanies the male drummer. However, *Quviasulipunga* is a drum dance song that *Arviat Imngitingit* performs with five drummers, three of whom are female. Gara Mamgark is one of them. She has a unique role of “female drum dancer” when she performs this song with the group. In an interview, Gara explained that she “loves to drum dance” and she does not believe that drum dancing should be an activity reserved only for boys. She says:

Drum dancing is for everyone. My grandma and my mom sometimes drum dance at the Mark Kalluak Hall just for fun. They dance around and everyone has a great time; laughing and singing and all joking together.

Gara perceives this gendered parodying of the male dance as an indication that community members welcome female drum dancers. However, my own experience with audience members after the performance of *Quviasulipunga* at the local community hall was the opposite. Elders and

young men expressed openly the opinion that drum dancing is only for males. I could tell that some men were genuinely upset that three of the dancers were female. I asked Ronnie if he ever drum danced for *Quviasuliqpunga*, and he said “no,” stating that the kind of drumming for this song “was not his style,” indicating that he, too, was not a supporter of women drum dancing.

We might understand these comments from the men as representative of their jealous feelings towards women. Considering the shift in Inuit gender roles in Arviat in recent years, the roots of this jealousy become visible. For example, my neighbours and best friends Rosie and Simeonie Mamgark are a typical middle-aged Inuit couple with a large family. Historically, the male was the hunter and provider of food for the family and certainly Simeonie, at times, fills this gender role. But Rosie has often called me to hunt with her on a Sunday morning and the two of us, two females, head out onto the tundra in search of caribou. Rosie is an excellent shot and she always gets her caribou! What is even more striking about this example is the fact that, while Rosie is hunting, Simeonie is at home taking care of their seven children, a task that was historically a strictly female one. Also, it is Rosie who is employed by the Arviat District Education Authority as a teacher’s assistant and who provides a consistent monetary income for the family. This is the case in many families in Arviat; the men stay at home with the children as the women head off to work. It follows that some of these men might find the women when drum dancing more threatening than they are in other contexts.

Inuit men who disagree with women drum dancing could be understood to be expressing the fluctuations and frustrations of their own status in the changing society of Arviat. Changes have taken place in hunting traditions, religious traditions, political traditions, and even family traditions. There were definite gender roles present in a traditional Inuit society, but these roles have changed over the years. Inuit women historically did not play the drum. Today, however, Inuit women are drum dancers, religious leaders, municipal council leaders, school teachers, hunters, gatherers, child care givers, elder care givers, and the list continues. Even the elected Member of Parliament for the Kivalliq region is a woman from Arviat, Nancy Karetak-Lindell. One might argue that, similar to southern Canadian women, Inuit women are dealing with much more demanding roles now than they were in the past. The performance of gender identity in the drum dance may be an impetus for understanding how Inuit

constitute their futures in the dynamic world in which they live.

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